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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 PARIS 000953

SIPDIS

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SUBJECT: GOF CONDEMS HARIRI ASSASSINATION, CALLS FOR INTERNATIONAL INVESTIGATION AND PUNISHMENT OF PERPETRATORS

REF: BEIRUT 451

Classified By: Deputy Chief of Mission Alex Wolff, reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

¶1. (C) Summary and comment: GoF officials reacted with shock and indignation to the assassination of former Lebanese PM Rafik Hariri February 14, with President Chirac calling for an international investigation to establish responsibility and punish the perpetrators. FM Barnier described the bombing as targeting Lebanon's political process, while a number of French media outlets viewed the attack as directed towards Chirac, given his longtime friendship with Hariri. In the wake of Hariri's death, French officials stress continued GoF determination to press for UNSCR 1559 implementation and free and fair Lebanese elections. The French do not appear to have formulated next steps beyond the draft PRST now under discussion in the UNSC, which they view as key to securing a SYG reporting requirement on the assassination. Though the GoF statements have been careful not to assign blame, senior GoF officials were privately candid with us in pointing the finger at Damascus. End summary

¶2. (U) The French Presidency issued a communique February 14 expressing its "horror" and condemnation "with the greatest firmness" of the assassination of former PM Rafik Hariri, whom it described as personifying "Lebanon's indestructible desire for independence, freedom and democracy." The Elysee statement called for "an international investigation to be carried out as soon as possible to establish circumstances of the tragedy and who is responsible for it, before the culprits are punished." FM Barnier, in subsequent press comments February 14, described the democratic political process in Lebanon as the likely target of the attack, and reiterated the call for the responsible parties, "wherever they may lie," to be identified. French media reporting on the assassination February 15 was more direct in pointing the finger at Damascus, "with "Liberation" calling the killing "the last red line" for Syria. A number of French dailies interpreted the attack as a message to Chirac, given his longtime friendship with Hariri and Chirac's intense lobbying for UNSCR 1559 and its implementation.

¶3. (C) Though the GoF declarations issued February 14 carefully avoided mention of Syria, French officials were more direct in blaming Damascus during private discussions with us. Presidential Diplomatic Advisor Maurice Gourdault-Montagne told the DCM late February 14 that "it was obvious" that the Syrians were responsible, while there was no evidence yet. MFA DAS-equivalent for Levant Affairs Christian Jouret, shortly after initial reports of the explosion, described the attack to poloff as "the Syrian response to Larsen's visit." Jouret conceded that the attack could prompt the GoF to recalibrate its strategy on UNSCR 1559, but he stressed his view that President Chirac would remain more determined than ever to press for implementation. Jouret added that the most important response to Hariri's assassination, rather than that of Washington or Paris, would be that of the Lebanese opposition and the Lebanese public -- would the opposition unite and consolidate public discontent with Syria or would Hariri's death mark the demise of the opposition?

¶4. (C) On possible next steps, Presidential Advisor on the Middle East/Americas Dominique Boche stressed to us late February 14 that it was very premature to consider UN moves beyond the PRST now under discussion in New York. Boche said that adopting the PRST would serve the immediate purpose of securing a SYG investigation of and report on the assassination. Beyond that, it was too early to say what steps might be prudent. MFA A/S-equivalent for Middle East/North Africa Jean-Francois Thibault told us separately late February 14 that the GoF was reexamining the text of UNSCR 1559 to see how its elements might apply in the wake of Hariri's assassination. Boche reiterated that the Hariri killing did not change the GoF's determination to see UNSCR 1559 implemented and press for free and fair elections in Lebanon this spring. On the latter point, Boche commented that President Chirac "shared the same approach" as UNSYG Representative for 1559 implementation Terje-Roed Larsen, on the need to be firm with Damascus on what it needed to do to implement 1559 and to insist that it allow free and fair elections to take place. Boche also commended the February

14 White House statement on Hariri's assassination as
complementary to GoF declarations.

15. (C) Comment: Hariri's killing comes as a great personal loss to Chirac, whose intensely private friendship and political/business collaboration with Hariri dated back to the 1980's, enduring highs and lows for both men. Hariri personified Chirac's attachment to Lebanon, shaped the French president's view of the Middle East in general, and was instrumental in Chirac's decision to press for the Paris II financial bailout of Lebanon as well as the decision to push for UNSCR 1559. As of February 15, we understood that Chirac was planning to attend Hariri's February 16 funeral in Beirut. Hariri's demise removes a key element of the GoF strategy in pushing for free and fair Lebanese elections this spring, as he represented the presumed leader of an opposition-led victory which the GoF had viewed, prior to this attack, as in the realm of the possible. While we do not see the GoF backing down in any way on 1559 implementation in the wake of Hariri's assassination, his death represents a monumental setback for the GoF strategy on UNSCR 1559 and one in which the initial GoF response appears to be weighted with caution rather than outrage. End comment.

Leach